

History Research Center

Indochina Wars

The French colonization of Indochina—consisting of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—was completed when Laos became a French protectorate in 1893. World War II opened new avenues for anticolonial movements in [Southeast Asia](#). In the wake of the Japanese occupation of Indochina, the Vietnamese Communist leader [Ho Chi Minh](#) (1890–1969) set up the Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi (League for the Independence of Vietnam), or Vietminh. He gave the call in August 1945 to liberate Vietnam. The [Democratic Republic of Vietnam \(DRV\)](#), or North Vietnam, was established on September 2, 1945, after the formal Japanese surrender on the same day. Laos and Cambodia did likewise. But the French were in no mood to give up Indochina. The Vietminh was ordered by the French to lay down arms, but they attacked the French troops in Hanoi on December 19, 1946. Thus the [First Indochina War](#) began. The Khmer Issarak, the Free Khmers of Son Ngoc Thanh (1907–76), were aligned with the Vietminh. In Laos, the [Pathet Lao](#) under Souphanouvong (1901–95) also fought against the French. The three communist factions formally formed the Viet-Khmer-Lao alliance on March 11, 1951.

In the [cold war](#) period, the United States followed a containment strategy and helped France by giving it military aid. It amounted to 85 percent of the French Indochinese budget, and it provided up to 40 percent of the military budget of France during the First Indochina War by 1952. In March 1949 the southern part of Vietnam became an associate state within the French Union, along with Laos and Cambodia. By 1950 South Vietnam had been recognized by the United States and Great Britain.

The establishment of the [People's Republic of China](#) in 1949 was very favorable to the DRV. China recognized the government of Hanoi and supplied military matériel according to an agreement of April 1, 1950. The Soviet Union and its East European allies also recognized the DRV. The actual combatants in the First Indochina War were the Vietminh, the Pathet Lao, and the Khmer Issarak fighting against the French. The Vietminh resorted to guerrilla warfare. By 1950 the Vietminh had established complete control over the northern free zone, and the communists had strengthened their position in Laos and Cambodia.

The commander in chief of the Vietminh, [Vo Nguyen Giap](#), was an expert on modern guerrilla warfare and led the army of Vietnam from its inception. His strategy of dispersing French troops and capturing weak outposts had paid off well. By 1952 half of the villages of the Red River Delta were under his control. The war was becoming unpopular in France, with a heavy loss of men from the French Expeditionary Corps and matériel. General Henri Navarre (1898–1983), the commander of the French forces, had captured the town of [Dien Bien Phu](#), 16 kilometers from the Lao border, in November 1953. Navarre established a fortified camp and was convinced of a North Vietnamese attack so as to open the road to Laos. Giap did not make any assault and instead surrounded the camp with about 50,000 soldiers of the Vietnamese People's Army. The siege of Dien Bien Phu began on March 13, 1954, and 11,000 French troops were entrapped. The Vietminh artillery cut off the supply by air to the French troops.

French Surrender

On May 7 Dien Bien Phu fell, and the next day the Geneva Conference on Indochina began. The Geneva Conference divided Vietnam temporarily along the 17th parallel into two states, North and South Vietnam. Elections would be held two years afterward to decide unification of the two Vietnams. On November 7, 1953, Cambodia became independent, two days later; [Norodom Sihanouk](#) returned to form a government. The conference recognized the Pathet Lao as a political party with control over the Phong Saly and Sam Neua Provinces.

Although there is no disagreement over the Second Indochina War ending in 1975, there is controversy about the year of its beginning. The years 1954, 1957, 1959, and 1960 have been named as the starting point. Most authorities agree on 1959, when the central committee of the Lao Dong Party in January called for armed struggle in [South Vietnam](#) to achieve the goal of unification. Gradually the whole of Indochina would be involved in war because the Geneva Conference of 1954 did not resolve the Vietnamese problem, and all the signatories violated its provisions. The United States provided military and economic assistance to [Ngo Dinh Diem](#) (1901–63), the president of South Vietnam. Diem refused to hold the elections called for in the Geneva Conference to decide about unification.

Compared to the weakness of Diem's regime, Hanoi under Ho was politically stable and increased support to the communist factions in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. In September 1960 Le Duan (1908–86), the secretary of the Lao Dong Party, called for the overthrow of Diem's government to achieve the goal of unification. Le Duan had earlier led the independence struggle against France in the south. The Ho Chi Minh Trail passing through Laos and Cambodia was the main supply route for North Vietnam to send convoys carrying supplies to the Vietcong in South Vietnam.

The U.S. commitment to South Vietnam strengthened during President [John F. Kennedy](#)'s administration (1961–63), when the dispatch of American Green Beret "special advisers" to South Vietnam began. In August 1964 the USS *Maddox* was attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats, creating the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Although the veracity of the incident was questioned afterward, the U.S. Congress gave full authority to President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) to retaliate. The [Vietnam War](#) escalated, with the survival of South Vietnam a primary consideration for Johnson, who had reaffirmed the policy of Kennedy.

The United States aimed at eliminating the Vietcong by bombing, chemical warfare, and counterinsurgency operations. Combat troops were sent in 1965, and their number reached 500,000 three years later. During the Tet (Vietnamese New Year) Offensive of January 1968, the communists attacked major cities of South Vietnam. Meanwhile, domestic dissent in the United States regarding the Vietnam War was gathering momentum.

The coup by General [Lon Nol](#) (1913–85) in Cambodia on March 18, 1970, added a new dimension to the Second Indochina War. On April 21 the United Indochinese Front was established. The summit conference three days afterward in southern China was attended by [Pham Van Dong](#) representing North Vietnam, Norodom Sihanouk as head of the National United Front of Cambodia, Souphanouvong from the Pathet Lao, and Nguyen Huu Tho as a representative of the provisional government of South Vietnam. The delegates called for unity in fighting against the United States.

The objectives of the 1971 U.S. attack on Laos were to cut the trail and prevent North Vietnam from attacking northern areas of South Vietnam. With 9,000 U.S. and 20,000 South Vietnamese troops, the campaign lasted for 45 days and resulted in a disastrous defeat of South Vietnam. The objective of cutting off the trail could not be achieved. The failure of South Vietnamese ground troops in spite of air support showed that it was not ready to take over a ground combat role from the United States.

The lessening of tension in the international arena had its impact on the Paris Peace Talks, which had started on January 23, 1969. The Sino-U.S. rapprochement, growing domestic opposition to the war, increasing success of communists in battlefields, the mounting cost of the war, and the loss of life of U.S. soldiers compelled the United States to disengage from Vietnam. The Paris Peace Agreements on Vietnam were signed on January 27, 1973. It was only a matter of time before the communists would score the final victory. On April 30, 1975, communist forces entered the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. The two Vietnams were reunited officially in January 1976. On December 2, 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) was formed. The government of Lon Nol in Cambodia was ousted by the [Khmer Rouge](#) on April 17, 1975. By 1975 the whole of Indochina was communist, and the Second Indochina War was over.

Further Information

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